

Undergraduate Dissertation

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Elizabeth Jolley's *The Well* as
a Gothic Novel

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1. Introduction

In this undergraduate dissertation I have tried to put to use the competences and resources that I have acquired during my degree in English Studies at the University of Zaragoza. In particular, I would like to analyse the Gothic conventions in *The Well* and the purpose that justifies their use. Besides, I would like to explore its location within the Female Gothic and Postcolonial Gothic traditions and the reasons for inscribing it into them. In order to do this, a summary of the Gothic genre, its main influences and conventions should be first provided.

Gothic literature owes its name to the Gothic tribes, in particular to a group of Germanic ones that contributed to the fall of the Roman Empire. The term later on broadened its use to refer to all things regarded as primitive and uncivilized. Nowadays, Gothic literature is still associated with those original values, which in the literary field developed more specifically towards an identification with the “true, but lost, foundations of a culture” (Punter and Byron, 5). The birth of Gothic as a genre can be dated back to the 18th century. It is generally accepted that Gothic literature started with the publication of *Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole in 1764. The main reason that led to the emergence of Gothic as a genre were the several cultural changes that took place in the 18th century. As is well known, this century covered a period during which, in general terms, reason prevailed over emotion. Gothic emerged as a reaction to this and the main Enlightenment tenets, and consequently stood as the opposite to all that was understood and regarded as ‘classical.’ Gothic advocated the chaotic and non-rational, it was ornate and convoluted and, on the whole, represented excess, exaggeration and a universe that overflowed previous cultural boundaries (Punter and Byron, 7). Since its very origins Gothic literature aimed for a “return of the psychologically repressed and the transcendental sacred” (Kilgour, 7).

When it comes to dealing with Gothic literature, there is a concept that must be taken into consideration, as it is quintessential to understand it, namely, the Freudian notion of the *unheimlich*, the ‘uncanny’ in English. The etymology of the term clearly points to what it mainly stands for. Whereas *heimlich* means something homely and familiar, its opposite, *unheimlich*, stands for the unhomely, hidden and concealed. “The *unheimlich* is intensely cultural and bound up with the Enlightenment; as a metaphor for mystery, the concealed, and unknowable, the *unheimlich* may be seen as the Enlightenment’s dark, but necessary double” (Hakim, 15). In his seminal essay titled “The Uncanny” Freud makes it clear that this notion stands for nothing new or strange, but rather for something that, having been previously familiar, it is no longer so owing to something that has been repressed. Freud thus invites us to question the relation between foreign and familiar, and to ponder on how repression can act as a means to perceive things, people or places as something strange (148).

As Punter and Byron go on to argue, “discoveries in sciences during the 18th century served to aggravate a sense of alienation and disturb notions of human identity” (20), to the point that, as a result of the need to engage with the more shadowy arena of the mind, the discipline that was termed as ‘mental physiology’ emerged in the 19th century, much to the interest of Gothic writers. The previous chaos and disruption, often attributed to external forces such as monsters, started now to be seen as products of the human mind (Punter and Byron, 23-24). Besides, the Gothic genre dovetailed into various forms or sub-genres, one of the most relevant being the Victorian Gothic, marked by the domestication of Gothic figures, spaces and themes and by its replacement of historical settings with domestic worlds or urban landscapes (Punter and Byron, 26). Furthermore, the emergence of the sensationalist novel in the 1860s transformed the Gothic genre, mainly as regards the role of females in the stories. To quote Punter and Byron’s words

again, in these novels “women tend to assume the roles of both heroine and monster, and provoke anxieties about the instability of identity and the breakdown of gender roles” (27). Moreover, “[G]othic sensation fiction focuses on family secrets and the immediate past of its transgressive protagonists” (29). This is the subgenre that eventually came to be labelled as Female Gothic.

Another important branch was that of Imperial Gothic, whose emergence significantly coincided with the final decadence and end of the imperial enterprise. Imperial Gothic took several forms and materialized in a number of formulae, one of which has been particularly relevant for my analysis, namely, the introduction of situations in which “some half-suppressed memory, or some deed whose consequences have not been felt – returns from the ‘far corners of the earth’ to pursue the protagonist” (Punter and Byron, 48).

Notwithstanding the specific features of some Gothic sub-genres, there are a certain themes and topics that can be regarded as recurrent in most Gothic texts. One of them is the ‘haunted castle,’ as this seems to be the preferred location for many Gothic stories. Although at first it was a castle that was mainly found in these texts, with the passing of time and as the genre evolved this location adopted different forms, such as a house or any other type of building used for habitation. Whatever the kind of dwelling, though, this was the setting where the distortion of perception started. Within these walls “nothing is what it seems. Even commonly accepted definitions of the human and the non-human, the natural and the supernatural, drop away” (Punter and Byron, 260). This dwelling place is often paradoxically described by means of using two sets of adjectives that mean opposite things. On the one hand, it is perceived as the site of secrets and as a labyrinth; on the other, it also implies domesticity. Ordinary life unravels there, but is also accompanied by the most extraordinary and inexplicable of events. Similarly, it seems to

offer characters security (it becomes some kind of refuge from the outside world), while also embodying a site of incarceration.

The feelings of paranoia and persecution are also recurrent in Gothic fiction. They are closely related to the feeling of uncertainty experienced by the characters, as they do not often seem to have much knowledge about the world around them. The 'self' in these novels is threatened or persecuted by its own unaccommodated fears. (Punter and Byron, 273-74). Even when there is a plausible explanation for their paranoia, this does not prevent characters from feeling that they are inexorably trapped by unknown obscure forces.

Imperial Gothic went hand in hand with Postcolonial Gothic or, to put it differently, the former demanded that the latter should in turn emerge if only to show the two sides of the same coin. The novel I am going to analyse could be included within this sub-genre. In the late 19th century, colonial fiction became quite popular in all its forms, mainly because of its attempt "to solve the lingering historical and political problems of colonialism" (Hakim, 2). When it came to bringing to the fore the so many contradictions and fears that the colonial enterprise entailed, it was the Gothic genre that offered a number of resources that other genres could not possibly offer. By means of "inquiring into the uncanny relationships between colonial narratives of conquest and intimate narratives" (Hakim, 2), this genre allowed to "bring to the fore what is unadmitted in a culture" (Lange, 42) and to articulate the "untold stories of the colonial experience" (Newman 86). The Postcolonial Gothic arises in response to the failure of national and colonial politics, riven by sectarian gender, class, and caste division, to delve into the effects and consequences of the different colonization processes, both upon the colonizers and the colonized (Hakim, 32). Since most Gothic fiction is shaped by historic sensibility, it is not surprising that colonial and postcolonial history should be one of the defining

factors of the Postcolonial Gothic. As had been the case since the late 18th century, the Postcolonial Gothic did not only focus on issues of psychological disturbances, but it also tried to offer a penetrating social critique, especially as regards the ambivalent feelings of attraction and fear that the colonized territories and their inhabitants aroused in the colonizers.

Among other things, as Hakim indicates, the main purpose of postcolonial Gothic fiction was to make it clear that “human significance and specific individuality cannot be separated from the context in which one is created” (32). Hence the importance of the concept of ‘home,’ which was thus understood as both somebody’s private sphere and nation. In the Postcolonial Gothic, homes and territories are often represented as *heimlich*, although they deep down conceal a most uncanny and uncontrollable nature. This ‘uncanny’ element is often expressed as “boomerang effect,” in other words, as “the return of colonial violence” (Hakim, 17), and the anxieties that the very notion of ‘home’ usually brings about are similarly introduced as some kind of quest into one’s true origins and identity. As regards supernatural events, they often become “a symbol of our past rising against us, whether it be the psychological past – the realm of those primitive desires repressed by the demands of a closely organized society – or the historical past, the realm of a social order” (Punter, 53).

Generally speaking, the Postcolonial Gothic is said to pursue four different aims. Amongst them, the one that most seems to fit the purpose of *The Well* is that which encourages “a rich sense of the presence of the past, the historical depth that underlies and helps to determine the shape and significance of the present.” In order to do so, “it creates this sense of “past-ness” in the present by investing intimate relations and private structures of relation and kinship with a deep historical and political significance” (Arac, 6-7).

2. Analysis of Gothic Elements in *The Well*

The Well depicts life in postcolonial non-urban Australia. The two protagonists of the novel are Hester and Katherine. Hester is a high-class unmarried and childless woman who adopts Katherine, an orphan teenager. They retire to live in an isolated cottage when Hester sells almost her entire property. One night, while Katherine is driving they kill a man by accident. They decide to throw him into the dry well of their cottage and keep this as a secret. Their problem starts when Katherine starts having hallucinations. It is this, together with the presence of some elements that are recurrent in Gothic novels that makes it possible to analyse *The Well* as belonging to this genre. This analysis will focus on the most outstanding ones.

2.1. The Cottage and the Well

The classical Gothic location of the haunted castle is, in this case, encapsulated by the cottage and its well. At the beginning of the novel, Hester Harper and Katherine move from Harper's family house to a cottage, placed in a corner of her property. This cottage can be said to stand for what has been psychologically repressed or displaced, not only in the Harper's family history, but also in the mind of the protagonists. As Renes (14) goes on to argue, in the case of Hester the land could even be read as a metaphor of her body, since it is when she sells the property and moves to the cottage that her defences start to break down.

The first mention of the cottage reminds us of classical Gothic novels: "The stone cottage had four rooms with little windows looking out in four directions. There was a verandah on one side and a little porch by the yard door. The only way to approach it, apart from the rough ride over the paddocks, was by a long winding track which curved sharply immediately before coming to the yard of the cottage" (Jolley, 27). This Gothic description disturbingly foreshadows that uncanny events will take place there. As Punter

and Byron state (259), the Gothic house is often surrounded by some kind of wild and frightening landscape that creates suspense. This cottage is in the middle of nowhere and the nature around it only contributes to increasing a feeling of desolation: “The surrounding countryside, Hester said, could seem desolate and frightening” (78).

Isolation, an important ingredient in Gothic literature, is tangible from this very first description. As Hester later on remarks, the cottage is actually extremely isolated: “You know perfectly well that no one ever comes here, we couldn’t be more isolated” (61). Moreover, the only visitors they ever have are Mr. Bird, Mr. Borden and a supposedly unknown man. This isolation makes it possible for the cottage to function both as refuge and incarceration, so characteristic of Gothic literature. The protagonists, especially Hester, refer to the cottage as refuge on several occasions: “Her place on the edge of the property was quite without harm. She had always felt perfectly safe once on the property as though nothing could touch her there” (59). Even when the accident takes place and hysteria starts, Hester continues associating the cottage with safety, thus ignoring the fact that the origin of the problem was her own mind (and Katherine’s), and that the cottage could not prevent her from suffering: “She would feel better once she was home” (109). What the protagonists are not aware of is the fact that the isolation the cottage was providing them with was the perfect environment for the psychologically repressed to be finally released into their lives.

The function of the cottage in this novel is not completely understood without taking into account the meaning and function of the well. The well has been a symbol of community since its very origins, as it often represented the resources for a community to survive. Therefore, if the well was dry or broken the community was bound to suffer (Bordelon, 2013). If the cottage is located in the corner of Hester’s property, the well is located in the corner of the cottage. In other words, the well might be said to stand for the

ultimate embodiment of Hester's and Katherine's repressed ideas on their psyches. In order to better understand what the well signifies for Hester and Katherine, some contextual information about them must be provided. Hester is a crippled woman and the only heir of her father's lands. She is not married nor has any children. Besides, there are four issues in her life that seem to have made an impact on her. First, the fact that she grew up under the only influence of her father since her mum died soon. Second, she only has 'a lame leg,' which makes her have low self-esteem and feel unattractive to men. Third, she witnessed how Hilde, the woman who had been for her the closest thing to a mother, had an abortion in the middle of the night. Besides, she is haunted by a feeling of guilt because she was not able to help her. And fourth, the fact that she caught her father and her idealized 'mother figure,' Hilde, having sex, which led her to conclude that her father was looking for a male heir to replace her. Judging from this, it can be deduced that Hester has a sexual and affective mood disorder that prevents her from having healthy relationships. On the other hand, Katherine is an orphan who was adopted by Hester at the age of sixteen. She grew up in an orphanage and Hester is the closest thing to a mother than she has ever had. Although she has been happy while living with Hester, she has always been treated like a child. Hester's possessive behaviour, together with the absence of any other person of her age around her has somehow prevented Katherine from having the emotional and sexual experiences that most young people usually undergo.

The well is known to be there since their arrival at the cottage, however, it acquires its importance as the novel progresses. When Katherine kills a man by accident while she is driving, Hester decides to throw his dead body into the well. This is, without doubt, the turning point in the novel, since it is then that their mental disturbances start and all that had been so far repressed starts coming to the surface. Therefore, the well would be the location from which all that had been concealed and repressed for a long time will all of

a sudden arise and start haunting the protagonists. The first time the well is mentioned it is said that “it had been dry for years and was partly covered with a lid made of sections of corrugated iron fastened on to timber” (28). According to Renes (8), as the word ‘well’ is etymologically related to ‘vulva,’ the dry well could be understood as a metaphor for Hester’s and Katherine’s repressed sexualities, although for different reasons in each case. When Hester and Katherine throw the man into the well, there is a sentence worth mentioning as it summarizes what this signifies for them. “The body disappeared, without protest, off the edge of the low wall scraping and breaking more of the rotting cover. [...] A quick burial” (82). As this subtly seems to suggest, they were actually trying to get rid of/burying their repressed feelings, and ‘rotting cover’ might just as well refer to the condition of their respective psyches.

As the story moves forward, the man in the well acquires different meanings for the protagonists. What Katherine conceals has to do with her emergent and repressed sexual identity, and she therefore thinks of him as a charming prince (Renes, 12). In the case of Hester, he actually stands for the opposite. Having had her sexual wishes repressed/ buried all her life, she thinks of him as a troll. Besides, she is afraid of him because she thinks he is going to take Kathy, whom she regards as her child, away from her. The covering of the well can be seen as preventing the repressed from coming to the surface. It must be noticed that, at first, the cover of the well is broken and therefore lets the psychologically repressed slip through: “Well cover’s a bit loose Miss Hester” (31). Significantly enough, it is Mr. Bird, one of the two male protagonists of the novel, who realizes this. The other male protagonist, Mr. Borden, is the one who actually repairs it, together with his men. It seems that the female protagonists need some male help in order to ‘close’/solve their problem. It is only when the well gets closed again that their mental disturbances recede and come to an end.

2.2. The Uncanny

According to Bennett and Royle (35-38), the uncanny can be represented in different ways in literature. Among these different manifestations, four appear to be most recurrent in *The Well*: imitation and repetition, sexual identity, fate and paranoia and hysteria. Yet, the novel also contains elements that, although not quite fitting into any of these categories, nonetheless point to this notion of the uncanny. The familiar that suddenly transforms into something not known is at some point experienced and mentioned by Hester. For instance, the nature she had always associated with safety is no longer perceived as such after the accident. She says: “[t]he white paddocks on either side of her did not provide the usual comfort” (103). The same is true of Hester’s thoughts about Katherine. “She wondered how Kathy could suddenly look dishonest. She had to realize that it was not sudden, that she had always dreaded a revelation of something not quite truthful” (116). As this sentence suggests, the uncanny in each person, object, place or situation does not appear out of the blue; it had always been there in spite of the individual’s incapacity to appreciate it (Hakim, 15). It is this constant perception of reality as something uncanny that provides the novel with a haunting atmosphere.

2.2.1. Imitation and Repetition

Regarding the issue of imitation and repetition, two elements can be seen as particularly relevant, as they trigger the unravelling and development of the novel’s plot. In the first place, the relationship between Hester and Katherine is a repetition of that of Hilde and Hester in the past. It is also worth mentioning that Hester Harper and Hilde Herzfeld share the same initials, which could be interpreted, not as a coincidence, but rather as signalling the fact that Hester will do in the future as Hilde did to her. Since neither Hester nor Katherine had any maternal figure by their side when they grew up, both of them tried to fill that emotional gap somehow. Hilde managed to raise Hester in the safe environment

that she had created, thus fostering a very close relationship between both of them. In that isolated sphere, Hester did not feel embarrassed on account of her physical appearance. The isolation that Hester provides Katherine with (they live on their own in the cottage), can be seen as an identical replica of the one she enjoyed in the past with Hilde. However, this does not work for Katherine as well as it did for Hester. This could also be related to the fact that Katherine, whose surname is never revealed, should she happen to have one, does not share the same initials of Hester and Hilde, which might therefore mean that she is not fit to follow that pattern of repetition.

In the second place, there are two episodes in the novel in which Hester behaves in a similar way. The latter can be interpreted as some kind of closure to something that happened in her childhood. At the end of the novel Hester recalls a visit she made to Mr Bird's house when she was a kid: "The wooden pram did not have any covers or any pillow and once Hester put her doll [...] into the pram, it had slipped down into the deep well of the pram in a most awkward way. Hester tried to rescue the doll but it was wedged somehow. [...] She had pushed the pram back into the shed upset by the offended and hurt look the doll seemed to have" (163). The word 'well' is significantly mentioned. This episode in Hester's early life clearly points to how determinant her sexuality and all things related to fertility will be in her life. A similar event happens in the future, but its different ending shows the evolution Hester has undergone. "She saw too a man's head [...] Supporting herself on the wall she tried to poke at whatever it was just below the level of the water [...]. 'Down!' she said in a voice which she did not know was her own. 'Go down! Go on! Down! Go back down'" (148-49). The man's head can be linked with that of the doll, and the well can be seen as replacing the pram. The feelings and wishes that Hester had tried to reject and repress as a child suddenly come back with a revenge, with uncanny strength: she cannot even recognize her voice as hers.

The two people that Hester sees as a threat are Joanna and Jacob. At the beginning of the novel she worries about Joanna's visit to their cottage. She is afraid that Katherine should love Joanna more than her. However, when Jacob appears in their lives, Joanna is not mentioned any more. It is when Jacob disappears that Joanna becomes Hester's main worry again. For Hester, they are identical figures, as they both represent a threat to her relationship with Katherine. Both of them are Katherine's love interests, one as a friend and the other as a future husband. In order to emphasize this duplicity, both their names start with 'J.' Jacob and Joanna are Hebrew names. Moreover, Jacob means 'to follow, to be behind and to supplant,' so he can be seen as a repetition of Joanna's figure.

Apart from these disturbingly doubled episodes in the novel, Katherine herself is presented as a master of imitation, which somehow turns her into an uncanny and unreliable character: "There was nothing Katherine could not copy or learn. She seemed to have all the makings of an efficient criminal" (20).

2.2.2. Sexual Identity

Hester shows a clearly troubled relationship with her own sexuality throughout the novel. She is described as a very unattractive woman on several occasions. She states that she is "elderly and ugly and lame" (108), and often refers to what she calls her 'lame leg.' Besides, nobody had ever shown any real affection towards her: "[Katherine] hugged and kissed her. Miss Harper, taken aback for no one had kissed her for more years than she could remember [...] the kiss delivered in this calf-like manner had surprised, even shocked her" (10).

In order to repress her affective and sexual lack she strives to make money and be the owner of both the family's property and Katherine. This feeling of possession becomes clear from the very moment that she 'gets' Katherine: "I've brought Katherine, father [...]"

and she's for me" (9); "Hester wanted to enjoy her new acquisition" (10). Hester sees Katherine as a possession, as something she can keep for herself in a way she couldn't possibly do with sexual and love relationships. When Katherine receives letters from Joanna, Hester realizes, much to her regret, that she "did not receive any letters herself, only bills and statements to do with the farm and requests from charities for money" (15). However, although she does not receive any friendly or romantic letters, she feels somehow comforted by the fact that, at least, she is powerful in economic terms.

2.2.3. Fate

Characters in this novel often say or think things that could be regarded as prophecies, most of which will eventually prove to be true. As Punter and Byron (284) argue, although coincidence and fate are common to most literary works, it is in Gothic that they provide the novel with a sense of "imminent doom that haunts" the characters. For instance, Mr. Bird states: "you could get a visitor, an unwelcome one, not invited, down that track any day" (60). This warning turns out to be true and, in fact, the most determinant factor in the novel. When she is getting ready to go out the night the accident takes place, Katherine smiles and says: "Who knows [...] we might meet someone real nice. A real nice guy might be there. P'haps I'll meet Mr Right! Groovy eh? Mint eh?" (66). As she did not meet anyone at the party that night, her imagination does the rest and turns the man she killed while driving into that much desired Mr. Right. The atmosphere then becomes increasingly tense, and the two women start to mistrust each other. When Katherine says: "Make a good burglar wouldn't I," this sets off Hester's alarms. Later on, when we read that Hester "hoped Katherine was not going to be all nervy or go crazy or out of her mind over the whole unpleasant thing [...] she knew it was imperative to be firm if confronted with hysteria" (111), this can be interpreted as foreseeing what was going to happen soon afterwards. Hester's words somehow predict the tragic ending.

2.2.4. Paranoia and Hysteria

Paranoia and hysteria are considered to be psychiatric illnesses. The main difference between them in Gothic literature is that paranoia is often associated with male characters, whereas hysteria is related to female characters. Yet, as Punter and Byron affirm, both of them occur when “the self is threatened and pursued by its own unaccommodated residues” (273). In the case of Katherine, her hysteric period starts when she suddenly begins to think that the dead man in the well is alive and talks to her: “He isn’t dead at all. I heard him. Soon after you’d gone I heard him. I heard him praying. He prayed ‘Our Father’ and called on to Jesus to get him out of the hole. Miss Harper, dear, I’ve been talking to him all day” (112). As Fall states, “female’s hysterics seem to circle around her inability to direct her sexuality as she pleases.” This is what undoubtedly happens to Katherine. Her sexuality, which Hester castrated by keeping her isolated from people of her age, especially men, suddenly erupts from the shadows of her psyche. Katherine shapes this mysterious man to her own preferences, she imagines he has “a very beautiful voice [...] a very good education [...] the sweetest way of speaking” (115). Besides, the words Katherine puts in the mouth of the dead man obviously respond to what she wants in a man: “When he’s up from down there he’s going to ask me to marry him” (115). Katherine is desperate to fall in love. Furthermore, when she says that “he wants children” (128) she is clearly disclosing her flourishing maternal instinct. Even Hester refers to Katherine’s state as hysteria.

As regards Hester, she can sometimes be described as the male counterpart in her relationship with Katherine, in part because of her lack of feminine beauty. Therefore, it is not surprising that she suffers from paranoia instead of hysteria. As was mentioned before, Hester is extremely possessive with Katherine: she is jealous, first from Joanna, later on from Jacob and at the end again from Joanna. While Katherine’s hysteria

fabricates fantasies, Hester's worst paranoiac episodes turn into headaches. The first headache appears when she doubts about Katherine's love towards her: "Her head throbbed; she hoped she was not going to have one of her bad headaches. She wondered if all the affection had been purely on her side" (43). Hester is dependent on Katherine; she is the daughter she never had on account of her troubled sexuality and unattractive physical appearance. Hester cannot stand the thought of sharing Katherine with anyone. This sick love dovetails in a state of continuous paranoia and jealousy: "With her usual honesty, she went on to tell herself that she was jealous [...] at her age. All because Katherine wanted the company of this Joanna. Rubbish company, a girl who could do nothing but harm. This other girl was dirty and infected and should be kept away from the freshness and purity of their own lives" (45). On another occasion we also read: "She was irritable and restless during the evenings if Katherine was writing a letter to one of the girls she had grown up with at the convent. [...] she always expected to be shown the contents. She told herself it was because she was fearful for the girl's well-being and harmful things, like drugs, she said to herself" (14). This only corroborates both women's psychic problems and vulnerability.

3. Female Gothic

Punter and Byron (280) describe the genre of Female Gothic as "linked to the change in consciousness resulting from women's liberation movements, of the late 60s." It is a genre which in general terms explores women's fears and desperate attempts to rebel against patriarchal impositions. By inscribing the novel within the conventions of Female Gothic, Jolley in turn managed to denounce the discrimination suffered by many women in postcolonial Australia. The idea of 'native vs. non-native' issues may be the first that comes to mind when speaking about postcolonial literature. However, as Renes points

out, this novel also tries to depict gender and class at a time of Aboriginal-exclusive multiculturalism (1).

Following Kosofsky's description of female characters in this kind of novels, both Katherine and Hester lack a maternal figure and tend to find a substitute (255). Besides, they are more often than not presented as helpless and screechy; they are eventually 'saved' by a man, as it is Mr. Borden who finally closes the well. It is clear that they, like many heroines in this subgenre, are described as "contradictory in their actions" (*The Female Gothic*, 1). As regards Hester, her main contradiction is the contrast between the astonishing confidence that she sometimes shows and the insecurity that constantly haunts her. Undoubtedly, she is the most contradictory character in the novel. On the one hand, she defies masculine dominance since "she felt she did not need advice. She had the reputation of being a quick-witted business woman" (30), but on the other adopts the male patriarchal castrating role when subjugating Katherine in the relationship she establishes with her. Although Hester "was sympathetic to misfortune and helped a great many people" (35), she is often guided by selfish, even sadistic thoughts: "Her comfortable contemplation of disaster for other people soothed her" (108). This ambivalence turns her into an uncanny character: she sometimes gives the impression of being familiar, but some other times she behaves like a complete stranger.

As was argued before, their existence seems to be nonetheless controlled by a patriarchal figure, in particular by Mr. Bird, who takes on this role when Hester's father dies. Although he can be regarded as a protective figure rather than an oppressive one, his death at the end of the novel feels like Hester's release from patriarchal subjugation. If heroines are supposed to behave with property and decorum and worry about issues of social status and respectability, it is clear that Hester follows this pattern: since the very moment Hester sells her property to Mr. Borden she feels troubled about her status. She

affirms: “she was no longer a respected landowner” (71) and feels inferior as “people [...] did not pause to greet her as they once would have done. And no one moved aside to make way for her to pass” (75). As far as Katherine is concerned, the paradox is that the patriarchal figure that seems to haunt her is nobody but Hester.

Another feature shared by many Female Gothic heroines is their emblematic names, never chosen at random. Hester is a name with Hebrew origins. The Latin form of Hester is ‘Esther.’ According to the Bible, a Jewish queen changed her name to Esther in order to hide her identity, and this name consequently became associated with the meaning of ‘hidden’ (Crispe 2017). This name easily relates to Hester’s personality, as she is a woman who leads an isolated life in an isolated cottage, a woman whose sexuality has been repressed or hidden all her life. As for Katherine, her name’s origins can be traced back to the Greek goddess named ‘Hecate,’ whose meaning is ‘willing, she who works her will’ (Hanks and Hardcastle, 154) Katherine is so determined to find love and have a romance that she is even capable of making up an imaginary situation to make this possible.

It must also be noticed that there is a close relationship between the Gothic ‘place’ and female sexuality (Ronald, 176). As was hinted before, Katherine and Hester’s subconscious can be said to identify the well with the vulva, the feminine organ par excellence: “Metaphorically, place intimates that [their] most sinister enemy is [their] own awakening sexuality; the web of circumstantial dangers [they] must unravel ensnares their nature as sexual wom[en]” (da Vinci, 187). As both of them have sexual problems, the well becomes the embodiment of their troubled psyche and sexuality.

Last but not least, the disturbing ending of the novel *in medias res* firmly inscribes it in the Gothic tradition. As Turcotte (83) states, “the Gothic rarely moves towards conclusions, or, if it does, it signals either overtly or covertly the failure of closure.” This

ending, together with the uncertainty that the closing of the well brings about, further create suspense and leave tensions unresolved, a most characteristic ending in Female Gothic novels.

4. *The Well* as a Postcolonial Gothic Novel

Gothic's malleability turns it into the ideal genre to "negotiate the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form" (Punter and Byron, 39). It may not be a coincidence then that the Gothic novel also tackled the different processes of colonization in remote places like Australia, perhaps due to the fears and anxieties that this historical episode inevitably aroused in the metropolis. It must also be added that, in addition to issues related to the colonial enterprise, Postcolonial Gothic literature often deals with "the different relationships between humans and nature [...] and the role of women in patriarchy, criticizing, defying or conforming to this ideology" (Baines, 10). *The Well* is set in postcolonial pastoralist Australia. Even though no aboriginal characters appear in the novel (at least not recognized as such), there are hidden clues in it that point to the dispossession of aboriginal land at the hands of white settlers. Nature plays an important role here; white settlers often find it harsh and inhospitable, in a word, uncanny, as they do not know how come to terms with it. Nature also stands as a unique entity, closely related to –and allied with– the aborigines and their idiosyncratic understanding of the land. The first description of the environment is quite telling: "The road between the endless paddocks of wheat would lie before her quite deserted and she would accept a different view of time and journey" (2). This image of desolation and an unknown endless land could be taken as the impression that white colonizers got when they first arrived on Australian land. The paddocks that Hester mentioned before are now referred to as "the paddocks so recently busy with the harvest machinery. Sheep, already feeding there,

scattered and were soon hidden in the cloud of dust” (27). Some kind of parallel could also be drawn between sheep and aborigines. These paddocks, like nature itself, have been altered by the ‘harvest machinery,’ which has in turn made sheep flee for shelter, just as the aborigines, who were “already feeding there” and are now deprived of their lands and scattered by the new settlers. The fact that the chosen location for the haunted place is a cottage also questions the colonialist ideology that “glorified a simpler pastoral way of life and white land ownership” (Hakim, 81).

Names are another key subject here. In the first place, there is the Borden family. It should not be overlooked that their family name echoes the word ‘border.’ They draw some kind of physical border when they buy Hester’s property and she is therefore displaced onto a corner of it. The Bordens fit well into the patriarchal design of a white family with children, and this is why they take up Hester’s place as she, being single and childless, does not comply with the norm. This could also be related to the dispossession and alienation that the aborigines suffered in the past at the hands of white settlers. On the other hand there is the Whites who, although not having much presence in the novel, are significantly moving back to Britain, to their roots, as if suggesting that they were not able to adapt to this unknown and unfamiliar land. Moreover, Hester uses an ‘English stick’ to be able to walk properly. She actually says that “[w]ithout a stick, this stick she was helpless. She never tried to do anything without it” (12). The fact that this stick happens to be English can be understood as Hester’s strong bonds with her motherland; the stick thus stands for that essential English part of her identity without which she would not feel complete.

The car accident is the most important event of the novel as regards Postcolonial Gothic. The most emblematic Australian animal is mentioned, as they think they have hit “a roo” in the roo bar (6). The man they hit with the car is never seen by anyone except

Hester. If this mysterious man were to be an aborigine, this would instantly become a metaphor for the whole process of invasion and colonization. The brutal clash could be equated with the violence the aborigines suffered in the process of settlement (Renes, 15). Katherine's statement somehow suggests this: "'But there's never ever anyone on this track,' she wails, 'there's never ever been anyone along here, not ever'" (5). The excuse Katherine makes to justify her atrocity automatically brings to mind the notion of *terra nullius* whereby colonizers justified their appropriation of aboriginal land. The man that has been hit, who is repeatedly referred to as 'the male-dweller,' is thought to be an intruder who tried to break in and rob them, the stereotypical idea that white settlers had of aborigines. Last but not least, the fact that he supposedly tells Katherine that his name is Jacob somehow reinforces the supposition that he is a native 'other.' As can be read in the Bible, Jacob was displaced from his land, just like the aborigines, to later on return to retrieve and recover what had been taken away from him. Jacob's story can therefore be said to "uncannily foreshadow Aboriginal dispossession and recovery" (Renes, 16).

5. Conclusion

The main reasons for classifying this novel as Gothic are several: the inclusion of classical Gothic elements such as the cottage and the well, paranoia, hysteria and the uncanny in its different manifestations, among others. Narrating the story according to Gothic conventions allowed Jolley to bring to the surface the uncanniness of postcolonial Australia, while pointing to the erasure and cultural extermination of aborigines (there are no 'visible' aboriginal characters in it) and making an interesting critique of the situation of female white settlers at the time. To do so, Jolley also relied on conventions of the Female Gothic subgenre. Finally, it could be concluded that the element that brings together the novel's different manifestations of the Classical Gothic, the Female Gothic and the Postcolonial Gothic is, above all, the repressed past, which plays such a prominent

role in the novel, as it is articulated in such a way that it can be interpreted both on a personal level (Hester and Katherine's repressed fears and desires) and on a national level (Australia's repressed shameful colonial past). As this novel seems to suggest, the personal cannot be detached from the political, as these two dimensions always go hand in hand like the two sides of a coin.

6. Resumen

Este trabajo se ha realizado llevando a cabo, en primer lugar, una recolección de datos e información sobre el género gótico y sus distintas variaciones; y en segundo lugar un análisis exhaustivo de la novela para encontrar y analizar las distintas manifestaciones del gótico en esta. Únicamente cuando han sido detectados todos los elementos góticos, femeninos y post coloniales, es posible entender el sentido total de la novela y su propósito: describir la realidad de Australia postcolonial vivida por los no nativos, y por las mujeres más específicamente. El resultado de este análisis podría resumirse en que la identidad individual de cada ser humano está atada al contexto social en el que habita, y por tanto lo *unheimlich* de la vida postcolonial en Australia marca también la vida privada de aquellos que la habitan.

7. Abstract

This work has been developed accomplishing, in the first place, a recollection of information about the gothic genre and its different variations; in the second place, an exhaustive analysis of the novel in order to find and analyse the different manifestations of the gothic in it. Only when all the gothic elements, female, and postcolonial have been identified, is possible to understand the meaning of the novel as a whole and its purpose: to depict the reality of the postcolonial Australia experienced by the non-native, and by women more specifically. The result of this analysis could be summarized as that individual identity of each human being is attached to the social context in which inhabits. Therefore, the uncanniness of postcolonial Australian life, leaves a footprint in the private life of its inhabitants.

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